

Kingsport Times-News

Kingsport legal aid office set to close next month

By Hank Hayes

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KINGSPORT - The downtown office of Legal Aid of East Tennessee - a nonprofit organization providing free legal services to indigent and elderly clients - will close effective July 1.

LAET, facing a \$170,000 deficit due primarily to funding cuts at the federal level, will transfer the responsibilities of the Cherokee Street office to a West Walnut Street location in Johnson City, said Kathryn Berry, LAET's director of marketing and development.

"We're losing two attorneys and five other crucial staff members, including an intake coordinator," said Berry. "We just lost our pro bono coordinator and will not replace her."

The organization now will have six attorneys to cover cases in 12 Northeast Tennessee counties. Last year, LAET closed out about 2,600 cases in its northern service area, Berry said.

LAET's biggest caseload involves family law - handling domestic violence and child abuse cases.

But the organization also works to prevent unlawful tenant evictions, has an ombudsman to monitor nursing home conditions and helps clients deal with insurance providers such as TennCare.

"A lot of people don't realize they qualify for food stamps. We help them to get them," Berry said.

LAET's primary funding source has been the Legal Services Corp., a private, nonprofit corporation established by Congress in 1974 to give the needy equal access to justice. LSC is funded through congressional appropriation.

At its peak, LAET had 14 attorneys in its northern region. The Kingsport office first opened in 1982, said Berry.

LSC's funding going to LAET started declining in 2000, when LSC decided to redistribute its funds to localities based on per capita census numbers of low income families.

"Although we have a lot more low income client population in this area than we did 10 years ago, we have fewer per capita," Berry said.